

The Dance of St. Mary Magdalene, 1519

FORTY-THREE HUMAN FIGURES, four angels, and nine animals dramatically tell the story of Mary Magdalene in three episodes beginning chronologically in the foreground with her worldly life. Surrounded by couples who, like herself, seem to have stepped out of Lucas' milieu,¹ Mary dances to the music of the fife and drum. The sinful nature of this entertainment is indicated by Sebastian Brant's words:

I'd take all those for fools almost
Who skill and joy in dancing boast,
Cavorting, prancing as they must,
With weary feet in dirt and dust,
But later than I called to mind,
That dance and sin are one in kind. . . .²

This scene depicts the Magdalene in her role as a courtesan, a role which has no biblical foundation, although it figures in German, French, and English mystery plays, in vernacular songs, and in didactic exempla of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³ Jean Michel's *Mystère de la Passion* of 1486 has been suggested in particular as the source for the interpretation of the loving couples. In the play, Mary Magdalene symbolizes both the five senses and the seven deadly sins.⁴ The latter association derives from the biblical passage in which the Magdalene casts out seven devils (Luke 8:2), who were first explained by Gregory the Great as the seven vices.⁵ Michel's play may also be the source of the musical accompaniment. In the drama, when Mary Magdalene and her two maids first appear on the stage, Mary suggests that they sing "some new songs" and live "the joyous life," after which they sing a "popular song of their own choice."⁶

There are also other connections to the theater. Like Dürer's moralist in his depictions of *The Ship of Fools* and *The Freydal*, Lucas' fool wears a cameo sleeve weighted down by a tassel, thus acknowledging the convention for the costume of "fous" and "sots" who played on temporary stages set up in towns and villages.⁷ The seated man on the right with a wreath on his head resembles the actor-poet in Hans Burgkmair's *Triumphzug* of 1512-1518, illustrations which Stella Newton feels are probably the most faithful surviving records of a stage production of the Renaissance.⁸

The specific subject of the dancing Magdalene had no

Engraving
297 x 404 (11¹¹/₁₆ x 15⁷/₈)
B., D. 122, H. 122 I/III, L. 117, O. 106, V. 121 I/III
Philadelphia Museum of Art

precedent in the visual arts, this image being entirely of Lucas' own invention.⁹ However, the actual disposition of the group does recall the popular love gardens and courtly dances of Lucas' predecessors. In particular, two pictorial sources have been cited: Dürer's drawing in the Ashmolean Museum entitled *The Pleasures of the World* and Israhel van Meckenem's print entitled *The Feast of Herod*.¹⁰ Other possible sources for Lucas' engraving are two love gardens by the Master of the Love Gardens and *The Ball* by Master MZ.¹¹

The scene in the middle ground is also extremely unusual.¹² The interpretation of the Magdalene as a huntress on horseback has eluded scholars. Perhaps it is another instance of her courtly life in the world.

In the background, a tiny vignette shows the nude Magdalene being lifted to heaven by four angels from her hermitage at St. Baume in southern France.¹³ This is the more traditional representation of the repentant sinner, a subject which Lucas himself depicted over ten years earlier (B. 123).¹⁴

In view of its complex landscape setting and wealth of narrative detail, a remarkable feature of this print is its clarity and orderliness. As a well-orchestrated composition on an impressively ambitious scale, this engraving stands as a tour de force both in the artist's own career and in the history of printmaking.

Due to the size of the plate, most impressions are unevenly printed. The Philadelphia impression has been selected because, despite its several printing flaws, it conveys the artist's atmospheric interests more clearly than any other example available in the United States.

There is a slip stroke (of approximately two inches) in the mountains running from the freestanding tree on the left toward the lower right edge of the picture. It does not always print, and when it does, it is apparent only in the earliest impressions. The same is true of another stroke through the dog to the right of the tree on the right; this line grows faint in later impressions. The horizontal wiping scratches in the sky to the right of the mountain and on the cartouche at the bottom also tend to disappear with wear. However, caution must be noted in using these lines as reliable indicators of wear.



Not surprisingly, the large format has caused preservation problems. Most prints have been folded vertically, probably for storage in portfolios, and have suffered tears, abrasions, and even punctures. This one has been cut on the borderline along all the edges, except on the right side.

1. Stella Mary Newton, *Renaissance Theatre Costume and the Sense of the Historic Past* (London, 1975), 245-246, fig. 80.
2. Brant, *Ship of Fools*, 204-205.
3. Parshall, "Lucas," 225.
4. Sue Welsh Reed, *Boston Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin* 61 (1963), 127-128.
5. "What are meant by the seven devils, unless all vices? Because all time is included in seven days, surely the universe is figured on the number seven. Therefore Mary, who was full of all vices, had seven devils. But lo, because she saw the stains of her baseness, she ran to be washed at the fountain of mercy" (Sanctus Gregorius Magnus, *XL Homiliarum in Evangelia*, Lib. II, Homil. XXXIII, Migne, P.L., vol. 76, col. 1239, as quoted in Helen M. Garth, *St. Mary Magdalene in Medieval Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, series 67, no. 3 [1950], 93). Also see Joseph Harris, "Maiden in the Mor Lay and the Medieval Magdalene Tradition," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1 (1971), 59-87, where this same quotation from Gregory the Great is interpreted in ballads about the Magdalene. Likewise, the Digby play interprets the Magdalene's dancing partner as an emissary of the devil (Parshall, "Lucas," 225).
6. "Disons quelques chanchons nouvelles/et vivons de joyuesse vie" (Jean Michel, *Le mystère la Passion*, in *Le Livre de Conduite du Regisseur et la Compte des Depenses Pour le Mystère de la Passion Joué à Mons en 1501*, ed. Gustave Cohen [Paris, 1925], 177). The same play describes Lazarus' (Mary's alleged brother) addiction to hunting.

7. Newton, *Renaissance Theatre Costume*, 173-174.
8. Newton, *Renaissance Theatre Costume*, 174.
9. Parshall cites two examples of earlier representations of the Magdalene prior to her conversion: a piece of fifteenth-century French stained glass showing scenes of her worldly life (Réau, *Iconographie*, 3:854); and an illuminated manuscript produced for the court of Francis I which included an illustrated life of the Magdalene (Emile Mâle, *Les saints compagnons du Christ* [Paris, 1958], 75). See Parshall, "Lucas," 228.
10. Parshall, "Lucas," 228-229, describes Lucas' approach to religious narrative, and compares it to van Meckenem's approach in his *The Feast of Herod*.
11. An important example of this subject is the painting in the Lakenhal Museum, Leiden, attributed to Aertgen van Leyden. For more on this artist, see J. Bruyn, "Twee St. Antonius-Panelen en andere Werken van Aertgen van Leyden," *NKJ* 11 (1960), 36-139.
12. The only other contemporary example of Mary Magdalene as a huntress on horseback is the shutter of a triptych of about 1515-1520 by the Master of the Legend of Mary Magdalene (Jeanne Tombu, "Un triptyque du Maître de la Légende de Marie-Madeleine," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 15 [1927], 299-311). Tombu provides an important discussion of portrayals of the Magdalene in light of the religious controversies at the time.
13. Robert A. Koch, "La Sainte-Baume in Flemish Landscape Painting of the Sixteenth Century," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 66 (November 1965), 273-282.
14. Even the earlier representation was rather original as it showed the Magdalene earthbound on her mountain, not ascending to heaven.

PROVENANCE: Coll. E. Durand (Lugt 741)

WATERMARK: Gothic P (Hollstein 25)